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RUEHGI/AMEMBASSY BANGUI 0037

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SUBJECT: UPDATE-OVER 20,000 DISPLACED BY VIOLENCE IN DRC INTO CONGO-B

REF: (A) BRAZZAVILLE 318, (B) KINSHASA 997

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1.(U)SUMMARY: Over 20,000 people have been displaced from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) into the Republic of Congo (ROC) since outbreak of violence in Dongo, DRC on 29 October 2009. Over the last two weeks, the displaced have set up camps along the west (ROC) bank of the Ubangi River. Although the flow of displaced persons across the Ubangi has slowed significantly, the situation remains an emerging humanitarian crisis. The lack of shelter, potable water, sanitation, food, and health care in the camps has already led to deaths among the displaced. Evidence on the ground suggests that a rapid repatriation to the DRC is improbable and the conditions in the camps will likely become worse before they get better. The GROC and UN institutions in the ROC are coordinating the response to this crisis and have already delivered some supplies to the displaced. The UN and GROC, however, have yet to agree on a clear plan for the next steps and may lack the resources necessary to effectively dispatch enough humanitarian supplies to meet the growing needs of the displaced in this remote region. END SUMMARY.

BACKGROUND

2.(U) Since October, some 20,000 citizens of the DRC have crossed the Ubangi River into the ROC. Driven from their homes in the DRC by ethnic violence (REFTELS) in the Dongo region of the Equator Province, the majority of the displaced are now spread among more than 20 villages along the 160 km stretch of the Ubangi between the towns of Impfondo and Betou. Since the last report (REFTEL A), the official number of displaced persons has grown by more than 8,000 in less than one week. According to the ROC regional government responsible for collecting data on new arrivals, there were 24,194 displaced persons in the Likouala Department as of November 11.

3.(U) This rapid growth in the number of displaced persons does not stem from a spike in movement across the river. Rather, it

reflects a more complete count of the massive wave of migration into the ROC in the wake of violence in the DRC. UNHCR reports that in fact there have been three recent waves of movement into the ROC. The first group of some 1,000 displaced persons arrived in the ROC following the first clashes between the Enyele at Manzaya groups in May 2009. A second massive wave came across during the buildup and eventual outbreak of violence in Dongo between October 20 and October 29. Finally, a third wave came across the river as the Enyele militia moved south to Imesse (DRC) between October 30 and November 6.

4.(U) Since the first week of November, there have been no new major movements into the ROC. The official number of displaced persons, however, continues to rise. While some of this growth is due to more accurate reporting of displaced persons now that resources have been deployed to register arrivals, the UNHCR fears there also is a certain amount of over-reporting. Some people have moved from one village to another and have been counted in both locations. The displaced persons committees in charge of registration may also be inflating the numbers of persons in each camp in the hope of securing more aid for their group. Finally, there have also been at least two examples of ROC nationals who have tried to get their names on the displaced person's list in the hopes of securing free handouts for their families. Despite these inaccuracies, UNHCR reports with confidence that there are at least 20,000 displaced persons now in ROC.

CONDITIONS IN THE CAMPS

5.(U) From November 11-13 EmbOff participated in a joint UN/GROC fact finding mission dispatched to assess conditions in the displaced persons' camps along the Ubangi in the Likouala Department. Conditions in the camps depend on the setting. In

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general, the camps can be divided into two categories: (1) small cities, and (2) river villages. The camps visited and the total number of displaced in each camp as of 11 November is as follows:

(1) Small Cities:

Dongou - 2,450
Betou - 6,008

(2) River Villages:

Eboko - 3,377
Landza - 1,655
Afrique du Sud - 600
Mankolo - 500

6.(U) The conditions in the small cities are generally better than those in the river villages. Although the recent arrivals have caused populations to swell by 30-50%, most of the displaced in Dongou and Betou have found rudimentary shelter in existing buildings such as schools, churches, factories, and government buildings. The small cities also have medical facilities that can treat all but the most seriously injured patients. The situation, however, remains precarious and will quickly degenerate without continued assistance. In Betou, for example, 2,900 displaced persons are living in a dilapidated match factory that shut down some 10 years ago. One third of the roof has completely collapsed and the rest is falling down. There are two latrines and one source of clean water for nearly 3,000 people. Medcins d'Afrique (MDA) reports that between 1-7 November, 122 cases of malaria, 25 cases of severe diarrhea occurred at the match stick factory.

7.(U) In the river villages, the number of displaced far outnumbers the local population. In Mankolo there are two ROC nationals and approximately 500 displaced persons. These smaller villages have few facilities suitable to shelter displaced persons and most have taken to building rudimentary shelters to protect themselves from the elements. Some of the displaced have made shelters of sticks and palm leaves. Others have simply been

rolling themselves up in tarps distributed by UNHCR. Neither one of these forms of shelter offer much protection from the persistent downpours in the region. In the river villages, there are generally no latrines and no sources of potable water. Most of the displaced relieve themselves in the surrounding bush and drink from the river. Access to medical care is also limited. Since October 29, six infants have died in Eboko due to diarrhea despite the fact that there is a mobile clinic set up in the village. Lanza has a clinic building, but it has not yet been stocked or staffed.

8.(U) In both the river the river villages and the small cities, food is becoming scarce. Most of the displaced have been in the ROC for almost two weeks and even those who had time to pack supplies before they fled the DRC are running out of food. To make matters worse, most of the food consumed in the region was produced in the DRC by the very people who have now fled into the ROC. In the small cities, the displaced compete with the local population for an ever smaller amount of food. As a result of the increased demand and diminished supply, the prices of staples such as manioc have increased by 30% in the last two weeks. The local population also reports increased numbers of crops being stolen in the fields since the displaced arrived.

9.(U) Security is also a problem common to both the camps in the river villages and the small cities. In many of the camps, members of ethnic/linguistic groups that fought one another in the DRC have been intermixed in the same camps. To date, the ethnic violence in the DRC has not crossed the river, but should conditions grow worse, groups that currently live together peacefully could be driven to violence. More alarming is the cross border movement of militiamen. The displaced in the locations called Lanza and Afrique du Sud both report that militiamen continue to cross from DRC into their isolated river villages. Armed with spears and knives, the militiamen have crossed to purchase supplies in the local markets. To date, there have been no instances of violence, but the displaced fear

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that the militiamen could attack them and have requested that their camps be staffed with military personnel to protect the displaced from their enemies in the DRC. The GROC has repeatedly promised to provide security, but to date no military personnel have arrived.

UN/GROC RESPONSE TO DATE

10.(U) At the time of the assessment visit, the UN/GROC response to the crisis was limited to the emergency relief supplies that could be quickly mobilized. Despite media reports of 15,000 tons of supplies, as of 17 November the GROC has only delivered a total of 597 kilograms of supplies to Likouala. UNHCR has also made an initial distribution of non-food items including: tarps, pots and pans, water cans, blankets and mosquito nets. In the small cities, many of the displaced persons had UNHCR non-food items. However, some of the displaced have not put the goods they have received to use. While making rounds with the UNHCR representative in Betou, EmbOff observed numerous families that had unopened mosquito nets and brand new pots and pans hidden away in their belongings. In the river villages, families appear to have received tarps and blankets during the initial distributions made by UNHCR. Families that arrived to the river villages after the initial UNHCR distribution, however, have not received any additional supplies.

11.(U) According to the UNHCR representative in Impfondo, the UN response is currently focused on meeting the immediate needs of the population. To date, everyone is careful to use the term "displaced" instead of "refugee." Until the GROC decides to declare the displaced population as refugees, the UN will not make any investment in consolidating the scattered camps into larger camps, setting up a more elaborate registration system, or launching a food aid campaign. The GROC continues to work on a short-term emergency response plan and does not appear willing

to discuss anything beyond emergency measures to meet the immediate needs of the displaced population.

OUTLOOK

12.(U) The UN team has drafted a report containing the findings of the assessment visit, but the document will not be released for distribution until the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs approves it. This document will outline the key needs of the population in terms of security, water/sanitation, health, and food and should guide a more targeted and better coordinated response to this crisis. Meeting with the displaced in Betou, the GROC Minister for Humanitarian Affairs, Emilienne Raoul, promised that the ROC would "share what little it had." Through today, the GROC has made many promises, but failed to provide any significant aid.

13.(U) The biggest challenge faced by both the GROC and the UN will be to deliver goods to those most in need. Most food and non-food items are stocked in warehouses in the port of Pointe-Noire or in Brazzaville. However, 90% of the displaced population lives in river villages only accessible by water. Unfortunately, the Ubangui is only navigable until December. As the tropical dry season settles in north of the Equator, the river drops to a level that prevents barges from reaching Impfondo, Betou, or the villages in between until the rains return around March/April. Members of the assessment team discussed the possibility of setting up an airlift to move major stockpiles into the region, but the GROC is unlikely to provide the logistical support necessary for this type of operation. According to the GROC representative, the transport costs already incurred by the initial relief operations were too high to discuss publicly. Apparently, the GROC had to make a special request to the IMF to be allowed to even make their initial expenditures to support the displaced.

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14.(U) The isolation of the Likouala Department where the displaced have taken up residence is magnified by the lack of infrastructure in place. There are no paved roads connecting either Impfondo or Betou with Brazzaville. Both towns are now cut off as the rainy season has made the dirt roads effectively impassable. Impfondo also lacks a regular supply of gasoline and diesel. The UNHCR buys its gas in bulk and barges in a private stockpile for their operations. According to American citizens resident in Impfondo, the one gas station in town has gas for about ten days every year. Impfondo has a new power generation station built in 2005, but lacking an adequate supply of diesel, the city power only functions intermittently. All of these factors magnify the difficulty of running an effective relief operation out of Impfondo.

15.(U) Both the UN and the GROC hope that the displaced will quickly return to the DRC. However, this scenario appears unlikely. GDRC forces control Dongo since 8 November, but the displaced have not yet returned home. According to the UNHCR Impfondo representative who visited Dongo on 16 November, bodies are still rotting in the streets. Many of the displaced have lost their homes, their belongings, and any ties to the DRC strong enough to pull them back across the Ubangui. Others witnessed crimes committed by the militiamen. Residents of Dongo described being systematically robbed by the militia as they fled from their homes. Women report being raped. In Lanza, the displaced walk past the fresh graves of three women and one man killed by the militiamen as they fled the DRC. In Afrique du Sud, armed militiamen continue to cross freely into the ROC. The displaced doubt that order will ever be restored in the DRC and say they hope to never return.

16.(U) The current movement across the Ubangui is the latest in a string of incidents involving displaced persons. In 1997, the first group of displaced persons arrived in the wake of the ethnic violence in Rwanda. In 2002, 50,000 people fled DRC into

the Likouala in the fallout surrounding Jean-Pierre Bemba. According to the UNHCR, 12,000 refugees already resided in the Likouala province before the most recent movement across the Ubangui began. In fact, many of the people who have come across the river recently are actually returning refugees that were repatriated to the DRC by the UNHCR less than two years ago. Some of the newly displaced told EmbOff that they had even returned to the same villages where they were previously residing.

17. (U) From what we are hearing here -- and we emphasize that this is the Congo(B) perspective -- there is a widespread belief that on the DRC side of the river, prospects are not good for a speedy resolution to this latest conflict. According to reports received in Brazzaville, there are 30,000 internally displaced persons in the DRC who have fled the ethnic violence around Dongo to the interior of the country. UNHCR reports that GDRC forces have retaken Dongo, but have not demonstrated either the will or the capacity to bring security to the region. The ~~witchdoctor~~ com-General ODJANI (previously referred to as General Johnnie in REF A) and his militiamen continue to move freely in the area. In addition to the re-supply missions to the ROC, the UNHCR Impfondo representative reports that low level clashes between GDRC forces and the militia continue. Furthermore, rumors are swirling that ODJANI may even try a counterattack to retake Dongo. We stress that of course Embassy Kinshasa is also in close contact with the GDRC and UN in Kinshasa and may have more current or more accurate information on the situation in the DRC.

¶18. (U) To date, Embassy Brazzaville has not received any formal request for U.S. government assistance from either the GROC or the UN. However, given the evolving and likely prolonged nature of this incident, Post expects that a request for assistance is inevitable. Throughout the assessment visit the UNHCR encouraged the displaced persons to take the initiative and help themselves rather than waiting for aid handouts. Citing an African proverb, the UNHCR representative urged people be to proactive and use resources they have already received, saying "if someone washes

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your back, you can wash your belly." In interactions with the UN and ROC representatives, EmbOff adopted this same attitude, encouraging them both to take advantage of the resources they have on hand before making any requests for additional assistance.

¶19. (U) Post is in close and continuous contact with the UN and the GROC and will provide further updates as well as any specific requests for aid as they become available.

EASTHAM